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AUTHOR Peng, Samuel S.; Takai, Ricky T.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to provide descriptive information about dropout rates by various subgroups, their reported reasons for dropping out, and some activities after leaving school. As part of the longitudinal study, High School and Beyond, the National Center for Education Statistics surveyed 30,000 sophomore and 28,000 senior high school students in 1980 from a representative sample of 1,015 schools; then the center recontacted 12,200 of the seniors and all of the sophomores who remained in their same schools in 1982. The survey also included about 50 percent of those sophomores who had left the schools they attended in 1980, including dropouts, transfers, and early graduates. Response rates were very high, amounting to about 90 percent. Dropouts were identified and asked to complete a questionnaire inquiring about their reasons for dropping out, their plans, and their activities after leaving school. Some of the findings were the following: (1) about 14 percent of high school sophomores of 1980 left school during or after their sophomore year before completing requirements for graduation; (2) by the spring of 1982, many of these dropouts (more than 27 percent) were unemployed or dissatisfied with their work and were looking for work; (3) the majority of those who worked full- or part-time were engaged in low-skilled jobs; (4) most of the dropouts regretted their decision to leave school prematurely; (5) reasons for dropping out included dislike of or expulsion from school, desire to work full-time, or plans to get married, and (6) students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The survey authors surmised that knowledge of these findings may help school administrators to devise plans to curtail dropping out. (KC)

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Samuel S. Peng
(202) 254-7230

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# High School Dropouts: Descriptive Information from High School and Beyond

About 14 percent of high school sophomores of 1980 left school during or after their sophomore year before completing requirements for graduation. By the spring of 1982, many of these dropouts (over 27 percent) were unemployed or dissatisfied with their work and were looking for work. The majority of those who worked full- or part-time were engaged in low-skilled jobs. Most of the dropouts regretted their decision to leave school prematurely.

These are some of the findings provided by High School and Beyond (HS&B), a longitudinal study sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The HS&B base-year survey was conducted in spring 1980, involving about 30,000 sophomores and 28,000 seniors in 1980 from a national representative sample of 1,015 schools. In spring 1982, subsamples of the original HS&B base-year survey sample were recontacted. These included 12,200 seniors of 1980, as well as all of those 1980 sophomores who remained in the same schools they attended during the 1980 base-year survey (i.e., in-school students). They also included about 50 percent of those sophomores who had left the schools they attended in 1980, including dropouts, transfers, and early graduates. The response rates were very high: 96 percent for in-school students, 92 percent for early graduates, 91 percent for transfers, and 88 percent for dropouts.

During the first follow-up survey, dropouts were first identified by schools and later were confirmed by the students themselves. The students were asked to complete a questionnaire inquiring about their reasons for dropping out, their plans, and their activities after leaving school. They were also asked to take cognitive tests, including reading, mathematics, science, civics, and writing. This analysis was based on the questionnaire data only.

The primary purpose of this analysis is to provide descriptive information about dropout rates by various subgroups, their reported reasons for dropping out, and some selected activities after leaving school.[1]

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[1]Group differences cited in the text are statistically significant at the 0.05 level on the basis of two-tailed t tests.

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## High School Sophomore Dropout Rates

Some frequently asked questions about high school dropouts are: What percent of high school students drop out during or after their sophomore year? How do dropout rates vary by sex, racial/ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes (SES), and types of school (table 1).[2] (It should be noted that students who dropped out of school before the sophomore year were not included in the sample, and hence findings can be generalized only for the 1980 sophomores.)

Overall, in a 2-year span from spring 1980 to spring 1982, about 14 percent of the 1980 sophomores dropped out of school.[3] In population numbers, this percentage represents over one-half million students. This dropout rate is consistent with estimates from previous studies.[4] Most of these dropouts left school in the 11th grade (47 percent). About 29 percent left school in the 12th grade, and 24 percent left in the 10th grade (not shown in the table).

A breakdown by subgroups shows that male sophomores were more likely than female sophomores to drop out (15 vs. 13 percent, respectively). This sex difference occurred for all of the subgroups except the general high school program and the different "self-reported grades." Among the racial/ethnic groups, American Indians and Alaskan Natives had the highest dropout rates, over 29 percent. Hispanics and blacks (18 and 17 percent, respectively) had higher dropout rates than whites (12 percent), while only 3 percent of Asian Americans left school early.

Previous studies indicated that low socioeconomic (SES) background, poor academic performance, and non-academic program were related to higher dropout rates (e.g., Rumberger, 1981). HS&B data support this finding. As seen in table 1, low SES students had a higher dropout rate than high SES students; the corresponding dropout rates for the low, middle, and high SES students were 17, 9, and 5 percent, respectively. (The SES measure in this analysis is a

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[2]Dropout rates are based on computation that involved the use of sampling weights to make adjustments for 1) unequal probabilities of students being included in the sample, and 2) differential response rates of varying key subgroups. Thus, the results are unbiased estimates of population values.

[3]The first follow-up data collection took place between February 20 and June 25, 1982. It was possible that some respondents could have dropped out within this period after they had returned their questionnaires. However, the number is believed to be very small, and thus it will not change the estimates significantly.

[4]For example, see Rumberger, R. W., "Why Kids Dropout of Schools," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, California, April 12-17, 1981.

Table 1.--1980 high school sophomores who dropped out before graduation, by sex and selected background variables

| Background variable | Male | Female | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Percent | |
| All students | 14.7 | 12.6 | 13.6 |
| Race/ethnicity | | | |
| American Indian & Alaskan Natives | 27.2 | 31.8 | 29.2 |
| Hispanic | 18.1 | 18.0 | 18.0 |
| Black | 20.3 | 14.1 | 17.0 |
| White | 13.0 | 11.5 | 12.2 |
| Asian American | 3.5 | 2.7 | 3.1 |
| Socioeconomic status | | | |
| High | 7.0 | 3.2 | 5.2 |
| Middle | 9.6 | 8.3 | 9.0 |
| Low | 17.8 | 17.1 | 17.4 |
| Unknown | 32.3 | 30.9 | 31.6 |
| Community type | | | |
| Urban | 20.8 | 17.0 | 18.9 |
| Suburban | 12.5 | 11.0 | 11.8 |
| Rural | 13.6 | 12.0 | 12.8 |
| Geographic region | | | |
| Northeast | 13.4 | 9.0 | 11.3 |
| North Central | 12.2 | 11.7 | 12.0 |
| South | 16.4 | 14.0 | 15.2 |
| West | 17.0 | 16.3 | 16.6 |
| High school program | | | |
| Academic | 4.5 | 3.6 | 4.0 |
| General | 12.7 | 13.0 | 12.9 |
| Vocational-tech. | 16.9 | 13.2 | 15.1 |
| School type | | | |
| Public | 15.5 | 13.6 | 14.5 |
| Catholic | 3.2 | 1.6 | 2.3 |
| Other private | -- | -- | -- |
| Self-reported grade | | | |
| Mostly A's | 2.0 | 3.5 | 2.9 |
| Mostly B's | 7.8 | 8.4 | 8.1 |
| Mostly C's | 18.1 | 19.1 | 18.5 |
| Mostly D's | 41.7 | 44.1 | 42.5 |

--Estimates are not presented because of a small sample size and a high non-response rate in the base-year survey.

NOTES: 1. All percentages are based on computations using weights that made adjustments for non-response and unequal probabilities of sample selection.

2. Corresponding standard errors and sample sizes for entries in this table are included in appendix.

composite of the following variables: father's education, mother's education, father's occupation, family income, and household items available. The information was collected when students were sophomores in 1980.) The "unknown" group consisted mainly of those students who failed to respond to the HS&B Base-Year Survey; thus, it is possible that many of them might have already dropped out before the survey took place.

Table 1 also shows that students whose self-reported grades were "mostly D's or below" had a 43 percent dropout rate as compared to 3 percent of those students whose grades were "mostly A's." Vocational-technical and general program students had a higher dropout rate than academic program students (15 and 13 percent vs. 4 percent).

Dropout rates differed among students attending different types of schools. As shown in table 1, about 2 percent of Catholic school students dropped out of school after the sophomore year, as compared to 15 percent of public school students. It should be noted that the differences in dropout rates may simply reflect the differences in the selection of students for these schools. (The other private schools were dropped from this analysis because their sample size was too small to provide a reliable estimate of dropout rates.)

Students in the Western and Southern regions (at 17 and 15 percent, respectively) had higher dropout rates than students in the North Central and Northeastern regions (at 12 and 11 percent, respectively); and students in urban areas had a higher rate than students in suburban and rural areas (19 vs. 12 and 13 percent).

Reasons for Dropping Out of School

Why do some students drop out of school before completion? Answers to this question may help educators gain a better understanding of the dropout phenomenon, and may also provide some basis for modifying or developing programs designed either to encourage students to remain in school or to assist dropouts once they have left school.

In the first follow-up survey, students who dropped out of school during or after the sophomore year were asked to give their reasons. Their responses are presented in this section. It should be noted, however, that post hoc explanations provided by dropouts may be somewhat questionable because of the complexity of the dropout phenomenon and the natural tendency for persons to rationalize behavior which might be regarded by others as evidence of failure. However, data of this sort are useful in suggesting some of the antecedent factors that may prompt students to drop out.

Previous studies cited different major reasons for dropping out for male and female students.[5] Hence, the self-reported reasons were tabulated separately for male and female dropouts. These reasons were grouped into five

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[5]For example, see Rumberger, R.W., "High School Dropouts." In M. E. Borus, et al., (Eds.), Pathways to the Future; U.S. Department of Labor Youth Knowledge Development Report 2.7, January 1980.

4 categories: school-related, family-related, peer-related, health-related, and other reasons (see table 2). (Respondents could mark all reasons that applied.)

Table 2.-- Reasons 1980 sophomore dropouts reported for leaving high school before graduation, by sex

| Reasons | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| | Percent | |
| School-related: | | |
| 1. Expelled or suspended | 13.0 | 5.3 |
| 2. Had poor grades | 35.9 | 29.7 |
| 3. School was not for me | 34.8 | 31.1 |
| 4. School ground too dangerous | 2.7 | 1.7 |
| 5. Didn't get into desired program | 7.5 | 4.5 |
| 6. Couldn't get along with teachers | 20.6 | 9.5 |
| Family-related: | | |
| 1. Married or planned to get married | 6.9 | 30.7 |
| 2. Was pregnant | N/A | 23.4 |
| 3. Had to support family | 13.6 | 8.3 |
| Peer-related: | | |
| 1. Friends were dropping out | 6.5 | 2.4 |
| 2. Couldn't get along with students | 5.4 | 5.9 |
| Health-related: | | |
| 1. Illness or disability | 4.6 | 6.5 |
| Other: | | |
| 1. Offered job and chose to work | 26.9 | 10.7 |
| 2. Wanted to enter military | 7.2 | .8 |
| 3. Moved too far from school | 2.2 | 5.3 |
| 4. Wanted to travel | 7.0 | 6.5 |
| Sample size | 1,088 | 1,101 |

Notes: 1. Students might report more than one reason.

2. Instruction for the computation of standard errors is included in appendix.

3. All percentages are based on computations using weights that made adjustments for non-response and unequal probabilities of sample selection.

For male dropouts, the most frequently cited reason was, "I had poor grades; I was not doing well in school" (36 percent), which was followed by "school was not for me; I did not like school" (35 percent), and "I was offered a job and I chose to work" (27 percent). "I couldn't get along with teachers" was the reason given by 21 percent of the male dropouts, and "I was expelled or suspended" by 13 percent. About 14 percent indicated that they dropped out because they had to help support their families.

For females, the first four most frequently cited reasons were: "I got married or planned to get married" (31 percent); "school was not for me" (31 percent); "had poor grades" (30 percent); and "pregnancy" (23 percent). Being "offered a job" was cited by 11 percent of the female dropouts, and "couldn't get along with teachers" by 10 percent.

## How Do They Fare After Leaving High School

A major concern of society is that dropouts generally have more difficulties than graduates in getting jobs. HS&B data showed that many of the dropouts experienced such difficulties. As shown in table 3, about 27 percent of male dropouts and 31 percent of female dropouts reported that they were looking for work in the first week of February 1982. Only about 60 percent of males and 33 percent of females were working for pay full- or part-time.

Table 3.--1980 sophomore high school dropouts in selected activities in the first week of February 1982, by sex and race.

| Activity | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| | Percent | |
| Working for pay full- or part-time | 59.6 | 33.0 |
| Looking for work | 27.3 | 31.4 |
| Homemaker (no other work) | 2.1 | 32.1 |
| Sample size | 1,188 | 1,101 |

Notes: 1. Instruction for the computation of standard errors is included in appendix.

2. All percentages are based on computations using weights that made adjustments for non-response and unequal probabilities of sample selection.

A large percentage of female dropouts reported that they were homemakers (without other jobs) in the first week of February 1982 (about 32 percent). This was consistent with one of their major reasons for dropping out: "got married or planned to get married."

When asked about the kind of work they did for pay on their current or most recent job, dropouts frequently reported the kind of work that did not require much training. As table 4 shows, only about 14 percent of the males and 3 percent of the females reported doing skilled trade work. Other kinds of jobs often reported by males included: waiter (14 percent), manual laborer (12 percent), factory worker (11 percent), farm worker (9 percent), and gas station attendent (8 percent). For female dropouts, the most frequently cited job was working as a waitress (23 percent). This was followed by jobs as a store clerk (15 percent), baby sitter (14 percent), and office or clerical worker (10 percent).

Table 4.--Work that 1980 sophomore high school dropouts did on their most recent job, by sex

| Kind of work | Male | Female |
|---|---|---|
| | Percentage Distribution | |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Lawn work, odd jobs | 6.0 | 2.9 |
| Waiter, waitress | 14.1 | 23.0 |
| Baby sitting or child care | .1 | 14.0 |
| Farm work | 8.7 | 1.5 |
| Factory work | 10.9 | 8.0 |
| Skilled trade | 13.9 | 2.8 |
| Other manual labor | 12.1 | 8.1 |
| Store clerk or salesperson | 5.9 | 15.2 |
| Office or clerical | 1.2 | 10.2 |
| Hospital or health | .9 | 2.5 |
| Gas station, car wash | 8.4 | 1.9 |
| Delivery jobs | 1.7 | .4 |
| Military | 5.8 | 2.4 |
| Other jobs | 10.4 | 7.2 |
| Sample size | 1,188 | 1,101 |

Notes: 1. Columns may not add to 100.0 because of rounding.

2. Respondents were asked to choose the job that paid them the most per week if they had more than one kind of work.

3. Instruction for the computation of standard errors is included in appendix.

4. All percentages are based on computations using weights that made adjustments for non-response and unequal probabilities of sample selection.

One might wonder how dropouts felt about their decision to leave school prematurely. According to their own reports, relatively soon after dropping out, about 51 percent of males and 55 percent of females felt that leaving school was not a good decision. (These and the following figures are not presented in a table.) Within this short period, a substantial percentage of the dropouts participated in some kind of training program outside of regular school (about 25 percent of male and 17 percent of female dropouts). About 14 percent of male and 9 percent of female dropouts took part in the General Educational Development (GED) program. Future HS&B follow-up surveys will continue to collect information of this sort for dropouts.

## For More Information

The data base used in this analysis is available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Inquiries about the availability of the HS&B computer data tapes should be directed to the Statistical Information Office, National Center for Education Statistics, (Room 600, Brown Building), 400 Maryland Avenue SW., Washington, D. C. 20202, telephone (202) 254-6057.

This bulletin was prepared by Samuel S. Peng and Ricky T. Takai. For additional information about this report and about HS&B in general, contact Samuel S. Peng at the same address, telephone (202) 254-7361.

## Appendix

Standard errors (in percentage points) and sample sizes for entries in table 1.

| Background variable | Male | | Female | | Total | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Standard error | (sample size) | | | | |
| All students | .48 | (13,905) | .45 | (14,214) | .33 | (28,119) |
| Race/ethnicity | | | | | | |
| Black | 1.55 | ( 1,721) | 1.25 | ( 1,991) | .99 | (33,712) |
| White | .56 | ( 9,162) | .53 | ( 9,383) | .38 | (18,545) |
| Hispanic | 1.21 | ( 2,589) | 1.24 | ( 2,450) | .87 | ( 5,039) |
| Asian American | 2.01 | ( 213) | 1.78 | ( 213) | 1.34 | ( 426) |
| American Indian & Alaskan Natives | 5.65 | ( 159) | 6.34 | ( 138) | 4.22 | ( 297) |
| Socioeconomic status | | | | | | |
| High | .70 | ( 3,356) | .52 | ( 2,956) | .45 | ( 6,312) |
| Middle | .61 | ( 5,931) | .56 | ( 6,208) | .42 | (12,139) |
| Low | 1.15 | ( 2,819) | 1.02 | ( 3,499) | .76 | ( 6,318) |
| Unknown | 1.76 | ( 1,799) | 1.88 | ( 1,551) | 1.29 | ( 3,350) |
| Community type | | | | | | |
| Urban | 1.17 | ( 3,080) | 1.05 | ( 3,304) | .78 | ( 6,384) |
| Suburban | .64 | ( 6,799) | .60 | ( 6,961) | .44 | (13,760) |
| Rural | .86 | ( 4,026) | .83 | ( 3,949) | .60 | ( 7,975) |
| Geographic region | | | | | | |
| Northeast | .98 | ( 3,092) | .81 | ( 3,189) | .64 | ( 6,282) |
| North Central | .83 | ( 3,960) | .81 | ( 4,026) | .58 | ( 7,986) |
| South | .90 | ( 4,303) | .83 | ( 4,499) | .61 | ( 8,802) |
| West | 1.17 | ( 2,550) | 1.18 | ( 2,500) | .84 | ( 5,050) |
| High school program | | | | | | |
| Academic | .52 | ( 4,144) | .44 | ( 4,687) | .33 | ( 8,831) |
| General | .71 | ( 5,608) | .71 | ( 5,751) | .50 | (11,359) |
| Vocational-tech. | 1.17 | ( 2,622) | 1.08 | ( 2,497) | .80 | ( 5,119) |
| School type | | | | | | |
| Public | .52 | (12,000) | .49 | (12,411) | .36 | (24,611) |
| Catholic | .82 | ( 1,167) | .53 | ( 1,449) | .47 | ( 2,616) |
| Other private | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Self-reported grade | | | | | | |
| Mostly A's | .41 | ( 4,148) | .45 | ( 5,359) | .31 | ( 9,507) |
| Mostly B's | .64 | ( 5,553) | .64 | ( 6,006) | .45 | (11,559) |
| Mostly C's | 1.13 | ( 3,524) | 1.38 | ( 2,452) | .87 | ( 5,976) |
| Mostly D's | 3.42 | ( 547) | 4.72 | ( 287) | 2.77 | ( 834) |

### Standard errors computation

The approximate standard error of a percentage (p) in this paper can be obtained by $s.e.(p) = D\,[p(100 - P)/n]^{1/2}$ where n is the sample size and D is a correction factor estimated to be 1.6. To contrast two subpopulation percentages, $d = P_1 - P_2$, the standard error of the difference, s.e. (d), may be approximated by taking the square root of the sum of the squares of the standard errors for $P_1$ and $P_2$; that is, $s.e.(d) = [s.e.\ (p_1)^2 + s.e.(p_2)^2]^{1/2}$. The approximation will be conservative because of the exclusion of the covariance term for $P_1$ and $P_2$ in the estimation formula.